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Radioactive Debris Buried in Parking Lot

By Jim Ritter
Staff Writer

One of the choicest pieces of real estate in Chicago is a parking lot in the elite Streeterville neighborhood.

The owner hopes to interest developers in building a high-rise there as part of Cityfront Center, a multibillion-dollar commercial and residential complex.

But first, Chicago Dock and Canal Trust must deal with a legacy of the past—radioactive debris that's buried beneath the lot from a defunct lantern factory.

Levels of radioactivity at the surface aren't high enough to endanger motorists, parking lot attendants or neighbors, the Environmental Protection Agency says. But the agency is requiring Chicago Dock and Canal to do a study of radioactive levels below the asphalt.

The lot is on East Illinois between Columbus and McClurg.

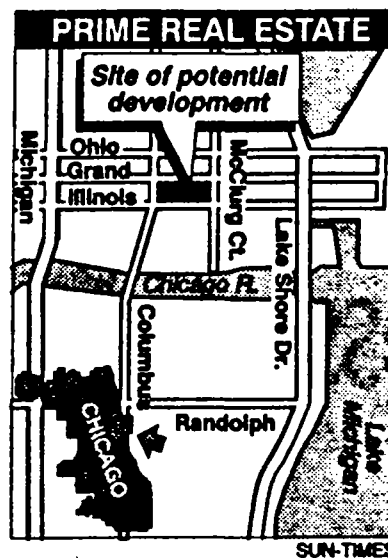
If it's ever developed, contractors might dig up "potentially contaminated soils," the EPA said. This could "cause increased releases into the environment and human exposure to contaminants."

An attorney for Chicago Dock and Canal said there's no health risk and the company is voluntarily cooperating with the EPA to conduct the study.

Records indicate the defunct Lindsay Light Co. used a building that once stood on the parking lot. The firm made mantles for gas lanterns. The mantles contained thorium, a radioactive metal.

In 1936, Lindsay Light moved to suburban West Chicago, where low-level radioactive thorium waste has been left all over town. Kerr-McGee, a successor company to Lindsay Light, has agreed to clean up the suburban waste.

At the Chicago parking lot, EPA readings taken last summer showed radioactivity levels as



much as 14 times as high as background radioactivity in the area.

A motorist who parked in the lot five times a week, 50 weeks a year in the spot with the highest radioactivity would receive about 7 millirems of radiation per year, said EPA radiation expert Larry Jensen. By comparison, a chest X-ray is about 15 millirems.

Lindsay Light also operated in a four-story loft building at 161 E. Grand. EPA measurements taken last summer show that some radioactivity remains in the building, which is leased to studios and other businesses.

The EPA says it doesn't have authority to regulate the inside of the building, and has referred the matter to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Years ago, workers sanded spots on the floor where radioactive liquid had dripped, said building manager Ron Steele. Last year, the floor in one room was replaced.

"Our people in the building are fully informed," Steele said.

Paul Charp, a health physicist with the U.S. Public Health Service, said only corner spots might be hazardous.